

# IMPRIMIS

OVER

1.1 Million Readers

Because Ideas Have Consequences

## American Journalism and the Constitution

**Tony Snow**

*Host, FOX News Sunday*



**TONY SNOW** was born in Kentucky and raised in Cincinnati. He received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Davidson College in 1977, and went on to study philosophy and economics at the University of Chicago. He began his journalism career in 1979 as an editorial writer for the North Carolina *Greensboro Record*, later becoming an editorial writer at *The Virginian Pilot* in Norfolk, Virginia, editorial page editor of *The Daily Press* in Newport News, deputy editorial page editor of *The Detroit News*, and editorial page editor of *The Washington Times*. In 1991, he took a sabbatical from journalism to work as President George H. W. Bush's chief speechwriter and deputy assistant for media affairs, later becoming a nationally syndicated columnist with *The Detroit*

*News* and *USA Today*. He was named host of *FOX News Sunday* in April 1996, and serves also as a political analyst for FOX News Channel. Mr. Snow and his wife Jill have three children and live in Virginia.

*The following is adapted from Mr. Snow's speech at a Hillsdale College seminar on October 15, 2001, in Scottsdale, Arizona.*

All Americans have a deep interest in maintaining the Constitution. This might seem especially true of journalists, who owe their livelihoods to the founding document that frames our freedoms. Yet for some reason, American journalists in recent decades have assailed that document with startling vigor – and have seemed blissfully ignorant of their treachery. Fortunately, the Constitution itself supplies a cure for this malady.

### Four Pillars of Pluralism

**BEFORE I** consider how and why the Constitution does this, consider a few of the fundamental ways in which it safeguards liberty. One is its guarantee of free speech and a free press. We have seldom given the latter much thought, because from the earliest days of our nation until relatively recently, Americans have venerated the Fourth Estate. Thomas Jefferson, for one, famously favored a free

press, even though he was the target of colorful and scurrilous fusillades from a dazzling array of journalistic foes. He regarded open public debate, facilitated by the freedoms of speech and press, to be indispensable for the growth and health of the then-fragile American republic.

Rigorous public debate contributes to constitutional democracy in several ways. It subjects ideas to the discipline of competition and creates a general appetite for truth – or at least for facts. Just as communist systems were built upon the careful and deliberate use of lies, the American system rests on an unquenchable quest for truth. Free and open debate is important also to maintaining public trust. Finally, it serves as a vehicle in forming a consensus regarding fundamental issues of right and wrong.

This concept of a moral consensus as an end or purpose of free expression reminds us that America's Founders envisioned a "republic of virtue." In his Farewell Address, George Washington called morality "a necessary spring of popular government." James Madison observed in

*Federalist* 55 that citizen virtue is more important in republican regimes, where the people rule, than in non-popular forms of government. Furthermore, the Founders connected this idea of virtue with religion. Even Thomas Jefferson, a fabled Deist, asked in his *Notes on Virginia*: “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?” And of course, the Declaration of Independence itself was based on natural law doctrine: “All men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . .”

Another crucial safeguard to liberty is free enterprise, based on the right to property. The first generations of Americans planted the seeds of what Alexander Hamilton called a “commercial republic,” combining civil liberty with a relatively unrestrained economy. Each citizen would have the opportunity to become a pauper or a tycoon, depending on his ambition, resourcefulness and luck. Capitalism provided the definitive solution to class resentment: If you didn’t like being poor, you could strive to become rich. No society enjoys greater social mobility than ours, and none has proved as inhospitable to the fashionable envy that hamstringed European economies to this day.

Inseparable from the rights underlying capitalism is the principle of limited government. If the Founders understood one thing, it was human nature. In framing the Constitution, they showed an appreciation for innate human weaknesses and took into account our tendencies toward ambition and avarice. *The Federalist Papers* abound in observations on this topic. *Federalist* 51, for instance, in explaining the division of government into three branches — one of several methods employed in the Constitution to keep the government from overreaching — notes:

*It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.*

Free expression, virtue, capitalism and limited government were four of the main pillars that upheld America through its first two centuries. One word summarizes the system of stable liberty that they combined to form: pluralism. We Americans don’t like unusual concentrations of authority.

Yet here we return to a source of wonder: America’s journalistic establishment, which owes its existence and authority to the Constitution,

fails to appreciate the Constitution’s intellectual architecture. Indeed, that establishment has mounted a sustained assault on each of the pillars of the American system I have just discussed.

## Stepford Journalism

**BEGIN WITH** the most obvious: free expression. The media today hate it. Several years ago, the *Los Angeles Times* distributed to employees a 22-page list of “banned” words, including “fireman.” The idea was to craft a language that would not offend people inclined to bristle with rage at the existence of such things as noun gender. The forces of political correctness, enforced under the auspices of “diversity,” have tarred and feathered just about anybody interested in exploring such issues as race or homosexuality, despite the fact that these remain hot topics among the public. At times, the press — which considers itself not just a tribune of history but also the protector of the Mother Tongue (if one can use such a term) — has blacklisted words without regard to their provenance or etymology. The mere sound sometimes serves as sufficient pretext for prohibition. A recent controversy over the word “niggardly” comes to mind.

More recently, a trend called “public journalism” has risen to lobotomize news reporting. Newspapers convene citizen panels, conduct polls, and seek the advice of political activists in the hope of becoming “representative” or “responsive.” These consultations invariably turn papers into reactive, inchoate, unreadable mush. One of the most devoutly avoided topics in today’s media is religion. The Founders’ public piety stands in stark contrast to the muffled guffaws of journalists that greeted candidate George W. Bush during the campaign of 2000, when he named Jesus as his “favorite philosopher.” The contemporary press may not loathe religion, but it regards it with extreme suspicion — and discourages unbridled discourse on important moral topics by appending labels (“religious right,” “right-wing,” “extremist” and “intolerant” are among the favorites) to religious orders or organizations that hold strong moral views.

As for capitalism, one can count on one finger the number of major newspapers that share Hamilton’s enthusiasm for commerce. Not too many years ago, the elite media openly treated socialism with respect and even deference, while scoffing at American-style capitalism. Think of the furor that arose when Ronald Reagan declared the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” Pundits predicted

*continued on page 5*

# H I L L S D A L E



*Professor Carmen Wyatt-Hayes meets with parents during Parents Weekend*



*Hillsdale College Tower Players perform Sophocles's Oedipus Rex in Markel Auditorium*

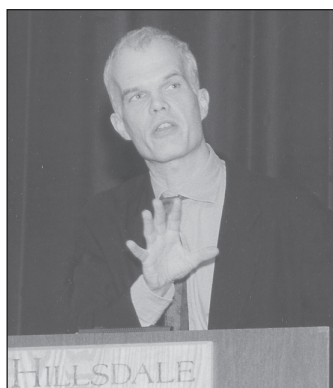


*High school teachers participating in the first Hoogland Center for Teacher Excellence seminar: "Teaching The Declaration of Independence"*



*Former Vice President Dan Quayle greets President's Club member Joe Jobe*

## ..... On Campus .....



*Richard Brookhiser, Senior Editor of National Review, delivers the Herbert H. Dow II Lecture on Journalism in Phillips Auditorium*



*2001 Homecoming Queen Betsy Noe poses with Clarence Black, Hillsdale College class of 2000 and a fall season contestant on the CBS television show Survivor*

## ..... Scottsdale Seminar .....



*Hillsdale College President Larry P. Arnn and Hillsdale Academy Headmaster Scot Hicks present the 2001 Salvatori Award for Teaching Excellence to Stephen Thorpe, of the Roadside Academy in Middletown, Connecticut*

# HIGHLIGHTS



InterShow Presents  
**The First Hillsdale College Cruise**  
**June 1-13, 2002**



*It's a WONDERFUL world.*

***Time is  
Running Out!***

Make your  
reservations today!



### Ports of Call

- Copenhagen • Helsinki
- St. Petersburg • Stockholm
- Berlin • Oslo • Dover

### Cabin Rates\* (per couple) Baltic Cruise-Crystal Symphony

Category	Brochure Rate	Hillsdale Rate*	Savings
PS	\$35,240	\$24,550	\$10,150
PH	\$27,890	\$19,540	\$7,810
A	\$19,520	\$11,410	\$7,570
B	\$18,720	\$10,940	\$7,240
C	\$16,610	\$8,760	\$7,310
D	\$15,900	\$8,390	\$6,970
E	\$15,230	\$8,040	\$6,650

\*Port charges not included.

### Distinguished Faculty

#### Edwin Meese III

Former U.S. Attorney General

#### Dorothy Rabinowitz

*The Wall Street Journal*  
2001 Pulitzer Prize Winner

#### Herbert Romerstein

Author, *The Venona Secrets*

#### William A. Rusher

Former Publisher, *National Review*

#### Larry P. Arnn

President, Hillsdale College

#### Thomas Conner

Department of History, Hillsdale College

### Additional Options:

• Hillsdale-designed private tours of St. Petersburg and Berlin at a special low rate of \$149 per person.

• London Post-Cruise Excursion featuring Celia Sandys, granddaughter of Winston Churchill.

Confirmed for St. Petersburg  
**Nikolai Tolstoy**



**Final Payment Due: February 15, 2002**

**Call now to get the best cabin selections: 800/797-9519.**

global conflagration as a result of the Gipper's explosion of candor. (Of course, Reagan was right!)

Socialism enjoyed cachet because the press had come to view limited government as a menace rather than a safeguard. Few mainstream press organs share Madison's apprehension in *Federalist* 48 about the government "everywhere extending the sphere of its activities and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex." (Note: Madison in this passage was referring specifically to Congress.) Journalists consider tax revenues as a secular tithe and measure virtue in terms of government outlays. When a president says he wants to attack some problem or other, the first question from reporters inevitably is: "How much are you going to spend?" — not, "What can we do?"

These generalizations hold true primarily because the media, for a very long time, had ceased to operate pluralistically. A handful of companies controlled American journalism between the 1950s and the 1990s. The old "big three" — ABC, CBS and NBC — dominated television, and a small coterie of newspapers — principally, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* — set the tone and standard for daily news coverage. As a consequence, the American press became a homogeneous blob and reporters displayed a depressing uniformity of views on moral and political issues. A 1993 Roper survey showed that 93 percent of all Washington-based political reporters voted for Bill Clinton. (A similar percentage did the same four years later). Other polls show that journalists embrace predictably liberal views on such hot-button topics as gun control, abortion, taxes, school choice, racial preferences and national defense, and that the profession is far to the left of the electorate on

virtually every key contemporary issue.

One can attribute this Stepford-like character of the press in part to a political peculiarity.

Between 1932 and 1994, Republicans were all but irrelevant in official Washington. Democrats dominated Congress and its machinery, and reporters naturally migrated toward those staffers who ran the capital's bureaucracies. Since the key sources remained the same, year after year, journalists formed ties of friendship, ideology and even kinship with Democrats — and came to view Republicans as exotic mutants. On the day after the 1994 election, a prominent political reporter in Washington called on me to provide introductions to some Republicans. Said the writer, "I don't know any."

## The Silly Myth of Objectivity

THE AMERICAN press wasn't always so homo-

geneous and dull. In prior generations, newspapers were notorious for their variety and passion. They declared full-throated allegiance to political parties — hence such names as the *Tallahassee Democrat* and the *Waterbury Republican* — and spilled ink as blood on a battlefield, a token of unshakeable convictions. So what happened? First, journalists decided to pursue the Holy Grail of "objectivity." They not only avoided making political statements; they pretended to have no political views at all. This whole enterprise was and is silly. God, the source of all fact and truth, is objective. But journalists, who often know very lit-

## ABC News President

David Westin, an attorney by training . . . told students at the Columbia University School of Journalism that his standards of objectivity forbade his rendering judgment on the propriety of flying an occupied jet into the Pentagon.



tle, are not. H.L. Mencken captured this quandary when he observed that the average reporter's mind is "a mass of puerilities and trivialities; to recite them would make even a barber beg for mercy." People who chase stories on deadlines simply cannot gather up every important fact or datum. Sources may fail to return calls; eyewitnesses may render confused or incomplete accounts. In laying claim to objectivity, writers and broadcasters submit themselves to an impossible standard and open themselves to public scorn.

The profession of journalism also experienced a dramatic cultural change during the latter half of the 20th century. From its inception until the 1960s, journalism operated like a guild. Apprentices began their careers as copy boys, made their way through a succession of newsroom jobs, and graduated, in time, to become reporters or editors. Along the way, they acquired important tools of the trade — experience, skepticism, and an informed humility about what they could and could not do. That tradition came a cropper sometime between the Second World War and Watergate. Journalists began to fancy themselves more as professionals — akin to doctors and lawyers — or as intellectuals. Media organizations sought out and promoted young graduates of elite educational institutions and set them loose without any of the basic training that earlier generations took for granted. In addition, reporters began to view themselves as crusaders rather than eyewitnesses. They set out to change the world rather than describing it. This combination of factors produced a press corps too often afflicted with the odd combination of callowness, callousness, cluelessness and arrogance.

As the intelligentsia turned sharply leftward in the 1960s, so did the press. Scribes adopted the world-weary Cyril-Connolly indolence that had

become all the rage in college faculty lounges. Patriotism became deeply unfashionable. So did optimism. The things that made Americans proud had the opposite effect on media stars, who found the old-fashioned customs embarrassing. This mindset has led lately to some moments of high comedy. CNN for a long time refused to call Usama bin Laden a "terrorist." ABC News President David Westin, an attorney by training, ordered his charges not to wear flag pins because to do so would constitute "taking sides" in the war against terror. Westin further embarrassed his company when he told students at the Columbia University School of Journalism that his standards of objectivity forbade his rendering judgment on the propriety of flying an occupied jet into the Pentagon. This would explain why the press, once seen as the voice of the Common Man, now has become his nemesis

— and why polls continue to rate journalists just above felons in terms of public approval.

## **Better Days Ahead**

**FORTUNATELY,** THE Constitution — the forgotten document in the journalism biz — has come to the rescue. Court decisions have chipped away at old media monopolies, and now a profusion of new media have risen to supply facts and points of view the old elite brazenly ignored. Talk radio, the Internet and cable television have shattered the "mainstream" media's grip on the distribution of facts and ideas. Rush Limbaugh became the most successful radio personality of his generation, not just because of his great gifts as a broadcaster, but also because he was saying things people couldn't hear elsewhere. The Internet also has become a public square for con-

**Not too many years ago, the elite media openly treated socialism with respect and even deference, while scoffing at American-style capitalism. Think of the furor that arose when Ronald Reagan declared the Soviet Union an "evil empire."**



# IMPRIMIS

## VOLUME 30 • NUMBER 12

**POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to IMPRIMIS  
Hillsdale College  
33 East College Street  
Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

**ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED**

### CHANGING ADDRESS?

Please use the enclosed  
postpaid envelope or  
telephone 1-800-437-2268  
or e-mail [imprimis@hillsdale.edu](mailto:imprimis@hillsdale.edu).

D01

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
Hillsdale College